

"To promote Christian ideals for agriculture and rural life; to interpret the spiritual and religious values which inhere in the processes of agriculture and the relationships of rural life; to magnify and dignify the rural church; to provide a means of fellowship and cooperation among rural agencies: *Toward a Christian Rural Civilization.*"

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THE RELIGIOUS NEEDS OF THE VILLAGE FAMILY*

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The American village or small town has played the role of neglected step-child in rural social thinking in this country for many years. Rural sociologists study farmers, extension sociologists and economists help farmers, rural preachers save the souls of farmers; in general, when we have thought rural we have thought farm. And yet it has long been true that while the farm and its products dominate the rural scene, the village or small town has always had about one-third of the rural population. As the returns from the 1940 census begin to come in, evidence begins to pile up that in the future still larger proportions of the rural people of the nation will live in villages and small towns.

The fact is that we know very little about American small towns. They comprise a sort of No-man's Land between the cities on the one hand and the open fields on the other. We have a generally held view that they are ideal places in which to live, especially for children, with their combination of wide open spaces, light and sunshine and air, fresh foods, and conveniences of city dwelling such as sanitation and store service. This view may or may not be true, for there has been but little research, aside from the work of Brunner and his associates in studying the 140 villages of his sample,¹ to indicate what the quality of life in villages really is. Even these studies have concerned themselves largely with changes in number of people and stores and churches without attempting the hazard of analyzing the goodness of life in terms of the quality of people produced.

For some time I have been personally concerned as to what the results of such a study, were it to be undertaken, would show. I suspect that it would completely explode many of our comfortable theories.

That suspicion that all is not well with the quality of life in our American small towns was first awakened when, in the course of a study of normal family life,² I separated the two hundred families that formed the materials of my research into four groups according to residence. They were fairly equally divided among Farm, Town, Small City and Large City. To my surprise the town

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1. Brunner, E. deS., Village Communities, Harper & Bros., 1927.

2. Mather, W. G., A Statistical Analysis of Family Relations Based on Students' Autobiographies, thesis, Cornell University, 1936. (Unpublished)

families, being families living in either villages or towns under 5,000 population, displayed a great deal more estrangement and a great deal less affection between the parents, a great deal more estrangement and a great deal less affection between the parents and children, and a very high degree of dissatisfaction with their home life on the part of the children than did any of the other three residence-groups of families. The town families were loosely put together, having few family social affairs; the individuals in them went pretty much their own ways. Strangely enough, there was a great desire on the part of the children reared in them to have families of their own, their wish for marriage and children far exceeding that of families in the other residence-groups; it seemed that, starved of the love and affection that children normally receive from their parents, these young people sought for it desperately in their own marriage. That whole picture is one of emotional instability.

Two years ago a study of the sex lives of over 1,300 college students³ indicated that village boys and girls had considerably more pre-marital sex relations than did those who were reared in other locations. That, too, is a sign of lack of security and emotional stability in the home.

In the same year the American Council of Education study of the situation of Maryland youth, embracing over 13,000 young people, reported that, if the Maryland youth who were dissatisfied with their place of residence should move to the place they desire, the farms would lose 6.2 per cent, the larger towns 14.5 per cent, and the villages would lose 58.5 per cent, the cities, of course, picking up the losses. That does not look as if village life were very attractive to village youth.⁴

In 1940 the Division of Research of the W.P.A. brought out the results of an inquiry into youth in agricultural villages. This report pointed out a considerable shortage of wholesome places for village recreation, a great lack of group activities for out-of-school village youth, a church attendance during the last year preceding of only 30.4 per cent of the youth, and a departure from the villages of about 35 per cent of the high school graduates. At that, the church attendance was the highest of any village organization to which young people might belong.⁵

The whole picture presented by these separate inquiries is of individualism, frustration, and emotional upset to a degree that we have not been accustomed to associating with village life.

Part of it may be explained by the fact that villages in general have not had a happy time in recent years. The paving of roads has put village stores in direct competition with large city stores, a competition which some lines of goods, such as clothing, cannot stand. A good many village and town merchants have gone bankrupt or nearly so. Population has been drained off from many villages to the cities where business has been better, with resultant decay at home; and when the Depression stopped that drainage, the result in many villages has been despair rather than hope. Other villages which have been located near large cities have in recent years grown in population as people have adopted the new tendency of living in a small town and working in the city; and for them has come the problem of the mixture of urban and rural morals with resultant confusion of

3. Bromley and Britten, Youth and Sex, Harper & Bros., 1938, page 156.

4. Bell, H. M., Youth Tell Their Story, American Council of Education, 1938, p. 38.

5. Melvin, B. and Smith, E., Youth in Agricultural Villages, W.P.A. Research Monograph 21, 1940.

adolescent standards. Then, too, the city dominates our civilization today; city occupations, city behavior, city recreations, city clothes, set the standard: and there are some city things which the village and small town are simply too small to have. Many of them have failed to develop substitutes, and consequently suffer by comparison with cities.

Families living in such a social environment are necessarily affected by it. Fathers whose businesses have failed have been depressed and moody and irritable; wives whose husbands have not succeeded in matching city standards of success have revealed their disappointment in nagging and bitterness; children have regarded themselves as the offspring of censorious parents in a futureless town and, failing to see any worth while values immediately around them, have concluded that nothing counts but leaving home and getting out of town.

It is not a healthy thing for people to develop attitudes such as that. They become cynical, they lose faith in themselves, they abandon religion and morality. To use an old-fashioned by expressive word, they sin. To use a more modern and academic phrase, these frustrated individuals suffer personality deterioration. But in either language, they need religion.

The question of what kind of religion at once arises, and be it said that they do not need just any kind. There are some kinds of religion which will not help them at all, but will on the contrary greatly aggravate their present situation. Such, for example, are the mis-called "holiness" sects, which have been spreading much more rapidly through rural areas than have the orthodox denominations. In general, their teaching is that if one will only surrender his heart to Jesus in an emotional affirmation of faith, Jesus will handle all the rest of his problems and he need have no more concern about them, but spend his time contemplating the glory that will be his when this world has been done away with by the will of God. Such religions are religions not of reality but of escape. They openly boast of the weakness and futility of the individual and take away from him the last vestige of his self-respect. They concede that man cannot meet his problems and create a better world, that he should stop trying to do so, that he should wait for "God's good time," and meanwhile dull the pain of earthly cares by singing and dancing to gospel songs. The cure they offer is little better than drink.

The religion which the members of the village family need is a religion which will help them meet and solve the problems of living, here and now, in a small town; for this much they are responsible in the present, regardless of what lives they may live beyond this world.

In the first place, they need a religion which gives them a fitting estimate of the values of life. Many of them live in towns where many business enterprises have declined, and all of them live in towns where the expansion of business enterprises is limited--it is obviously impossible to have a great factory or a large department store in a village. Mammon should cease to be the god of the villager. He must have a religion that puts high premium upon the simple things of life, that values the goodness of living above the length of the wheel-base of the family car. It cannot be a religion based upon the philosophy that the good are prosperous, but that the good make good neighbors. Such a religion will help to take away the atmosphere of defeat that underlies much of the nagging and quarreling found in small town families, and, in general, should remove from the small town business men their present tendency to envy Pittsburgh and Chicago. A good many village chambers of commerce seem to have confused those places with the City of Zion.

In the second place, they need a religion which exalts the worth of the individual man, and gives him a feeling of self-respect. The farm and village are in a sense reservoirs of labor in that they habitually produce more young people than they need as replacements for their own population, and from this surplus the city draws. When the city stops drawing, as it did during the Depression, many unwanted village youth feel pretty unnecessary and insignificant. They lose hope and self-respect. They need a religion which will lift them up out of their despair, give them a sense of personal worth, make them feel important to someone or something that matters to the world. "Oh, to be nothing, nothing," is no fit song for a villager to be singing in church these days. He needs inspiration that will make him amount to something.

In the third place, village dwellers need a religion that can give them adequate standards of conduct for the modern world. This is particularly true of villages that have felt an influx of city people, who have imported their urban morals and ethics with them; it is true, also, of villages located near cities where the urban standards are in open competition with the village standards. There is no gainsaying the fact that a new morality is in the making for rural America, and that in the resultant confusion of moral change many rural people will suffer serious hurt. The religion of the village family must be one which has a sane, sensible, healthy set of moral and ethical codes which it can present frankly and vigorously. This is needed particularly by the village youth, who reject the morality and ethics of their elders as being inapplicable to the new day, and have no standards to take their place.

In the fourth place, the religion of the village must provide an outlet for the affections of village children who live in families where little affection is displayed. They want to love someone, and to be loved by someone. It may be this unsatisfied craving that is responsible for some of the loose sex behavior of village youth. Religion can make a powerful appeal to the emotions of an adolescent by establishing a personal relationship between him and Jesus of Nazareth. The Master so presented must be a man of high character and great charm, no pale and feminine weeper of tears but a strong and rugged doer of deeds of service to all mankind. To love such a One, and to be loved by Him, is salvation indeed. Neither the cold academic religion of the scholar nor the hysterical abandon of the "Holy Rollers" will do for the villager, but rather a warm, sincere flooding of the heart with an honest devotion to the Man of Galilee. Such a love is clean and exalting for the soul.

There is a fifth need which religion can fill for the village family, and that is the need for companionship or fellowship. The village is the last stronghold of individualism in modern life. Here the independent merchant thrives; here the independent farmer trades. Now, independence and individualism are desirable things, but they can be carried so far as to give one the sense of being all alone in the world. Village families are made up of individualists, and yet the family is one place where the security and comfort of communal living should be found. Village religion needs to stress the community of the brethren, to emphasize the unity of the group. Members of village churches should constitute a goodly fellowship, a congenial great-family, a peaceful flock. They need to recapture the intimacy of the old-time crossroads church where everybody knew all about everybody else and yet loved them in spite of it. Village churches should not, then, strive for great size, for large groups cannot have such intimacy; but rather, large enough to be self-supporting and strong, they should surround the village individualist with gentle, humanizing brotherhood. The village family needs a religion which will hold it together. It needs a religion which will so impress its members with the value of group life that if they go away from the village and the family to live in the city, they will feel the strength of that fellowship following after them even as did the disciples on the road to Emaus.